

Involving students in meaningful language preservation work as early as possible

Presenters:

Sheri Wells-Jensen

swellsj@bgsu.edu

Jason Wells-Jensen

wellsj@bgsu.edu

Lucas Fullenkamp

lfullen@bgsu.edu

Bowling Green State University

The Situation

Our experience has been working with members of the Mingo Nation United Remnant Band (Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia) and with speakers of Oroha (Solomon Islands).

We thank both communities for their patience and for the opportunity to work with them toward the revitalization of their languages.

The Problem

There is a mismatch between the amount of work to be done in documenting and revitalizing languages and the number of people willing and able to do the work.

One often overlooked resource is the number of eager, but as yet untrained introductory linguistics and language students in our universities.

Goals

We do not reject any model of fieldwork that has been successful; our overall goal is to add more kinds of work and more kinds of workers into the mix.

1. Include more people in individual language preservation projects while maintaining a respectful attitude and not losing efficiency.
2. Increase the number of students who decide to become involved in language preservation work long-term.

Goals (continued)

3. Increase the diversity of workers involved in language preservation work.

4. Increase the number of meaningful opportunities for students to get involved. (Running errands, printing handouts, and making the coffee don't count as meaningful opportunities.)

Challenges

1. Although students are initially very excited about this work, they are also untrained. Traditionally, students have been told to take more classes, perhaps an entire degree, before they have the opportunity to work on a real language with real people and real data. The perception is that untrained students cannot assist in substantive ways.
2. Having an untrained student helper can be seen as creating extra work rather than being a helpful addition.

Problems (continued)

3. Students generally do not have the resources to travel to where the languages are spoken.

4. If the work is part of an academic class, doing B or C level work is not acceptable; students must be accurate.

Solutions

We have found a variety of strategies that make it possible to overcome these problems and to welcome these students into the work of language revitalization.

Solutions-Divide the Teaching

In a language camp situation with the Mingo Nation United Remnant Band of Ohio when we had no native speaker, instead of having one person do most of the teaching, we divided material to be taught.

Each of our students took charge of one small set of vocabulary or one grammar point and shared in the teaching.

Solutions-Utilize Student Skills

In preparing materials for Mingo language camp, we had students who were artistic or had journalism backgrounds design, format, and print pedagogical materials.

It was necessary to proofread the text before and after the set up work was done, but the project benefitted greatly from their input.

Solutions-Utilize Student Skills (continued)

Students who had acting ability memorized skits in Mingo which we could film.

Students with musical ability performed songs in Mingo which we then used as teaching aids.

Students in linguistics and education classes volunteered to test our Mingo and Oroha pedagogical materials to see if they were clear and effective.

Solutions-Technology

Working with Oroha language consultants over Skype has made it possible to include students who could not travel. This approach, when possible, makes the work more accessible for everyone.

Working with Skype and other technology also made it useful to have students with computer expertise to assist us.

Students have assisted with, e.g., recording and editing audio and video, and conversion of audio files to MP3 format.

Webpage and database assistance is always useful.

Solutions-Training

In building dictionaries, with just a little training, students learned what constitutes a 'possible word' in Oroha. For example, they learned what consonant clusters are allowed, what sounds can end a word, and what letters can be doubled when writing the word.

With this knowledge, they can assist in proofreading texts and dictionary entries.

They quickly transitioned from trainees to trusted co-workers.

Solutions-Additional

Students served as back-up note-takers during Oroha elicitation sessions.

Students also looked through our Oroha dictionary to find 'missing' words and helped us keep track of what information we wanted to find during elicitation sessions.

Students also conducted some Oroha elicitation sessions.

Assistance with grant writing is always useful and this requires little linguistics background.

Community Reactions

Reactions from communities have been quite positive.

Our students have been accepted as part of the team without question.

Inclusion

The philosophy that guides inclusion of students in this work is viewing our group as a community with members who have different strengths and weaknesses helping each other.

If there is a bit more room for diversity in how things are done, then there is the potential for more work to get done as more people join in.

As they are included as equal participants, we have less problem with sloppy work done by disinterested students. People with particular grammatical and phonological knowledge play a role, and so do people with artistic, organizational, pedagogical, and administrative skills.

Our team is strengthened by inclusion.